EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

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Impact, Influence, and Fame

Every summer and into the fall, academic department heads send e-mails or formal letters of inquiry to senior scholars at research universities requesting outside reviewers for their junior faculty's tenure or promotion applications. Journal editors receive related inquiries, too, asking for data to assess the quality of the publications where these aspiring faculty have published their scholarly efforts. On the latter, we are asked about *JCA*'s editorial acceptance rate, which is currently well under 20%, or our ISI Journal Citation Reports impact score, which I have been told has been climbing for several years. Such data are of questionable pragmatic value, only stating how much bad material is annually submitted for review and the ability of published papers to generate citations in related journals in the short run. Yet, the information retains importance for both young faculty and their Promotion & Tenure committees.

Because three decades have passed since my first academic publication in *JCA*, it is fair to wonder what impact my own years of verbiage might have had on other scholars.

At the American Council on Consumer Interests (ACCI) conference last spring, John Burton recalled how that now-ancient first article of mine was used in his class discussions. It was nice to hear such a compliment; the appearance of an article in course reading lists does give some indication that it is being read and appreciated, at least by the teachers of the classes. Others like to assess research impact in terms of how much it is cited in textbooks. Yet, while textbook content is often used as a reference of authority, there exist reasons to doubt the quality of that authority.

Armstrong and Schultz (1993) scrutinized six decades of different marketing textbooks and found 566 normative statements about business decision making, but none were supported by empirical evidence. Only 20 of the statements provided what might be considered general principles of

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marketing practice, but none of these statements were found to be correct, useful, or supported by empirical evidence, and 9 were judged to be "nearly correct" *when their wording was reversed*. My own review of how 36 textbooks covered advertising appeals to audience fears found that few reported actual research on what might influence consumer decision making, and of those that did, all discussions tended to focus on a theory that has never been supported in the literature (Rotfeld 2000).

The naturalist Stephen Jay Gould (1985) repeatedly pointed out how even in his field of science, "Facts achieve an almost immortal status once they pass from primary documentation into secondary sources, … errors are copied from generation to generation and seem to gain support by sheer repetition. No one goes back to discover the fragility of original arguments" (384). Nobel Prize honoree George Stigler (1985) made a similar assessment about economics textbooks, as did Goldberg (1996) for sociology. As a result, it is difficult to validly use textbooks as a meaningful reference for impact.

At doctoral consortium seminars discussing career paths for graduates, faculty often discuss the impact of research in terms of what respected journals published it, though just what is "respected" appears open to some disagreement. Many department heads or deans lecture junior faculty about where the aspiring scholars *must* publish research to have any hopes of tenure. And not unexpectedly, recent doctoral graduates often plan what topics they will study, what methods they would use, and where they believe they *must* publish, thinking only in terms of building a set of credentials on a vita. Granted, some journals tend to be seen as more prestigious outlets than others, but that does not necessarily mean all of their content will influence later thinking by others in the discipline.

Martin Anderson (1992) claimed that every senior economist can quickly assert the identity the best economics journal, though they do not necessarily all name the same publication. And when asked to name the most interesting article read in the past year, they would hedge, mutter, and finally admit they had "fallen behind" in their reading. I have repeated his experiment with senior business and mass communications faculty, usually with the same result. Publish we must, but it is uncertain how many people actually read those journals.

Anyone who has been writing for a while has published articles that engender comments, or so we hope. Yet, for this same academic author, other papers, maybe even in the same journals, become obscure so quickly that even friends do not know they are there. I once asked a faculty member about an article he had published two years earlier, and he claimed that he did not recall that it existed, that he was senior author, or that it was in the journal in which I read it. Apparently, that was the ultimate obscure article.

Even when articles are cited in later works, there are questions as to whether the citation was influential or just gratuitous.

Too often, I see articles I wrote cited in other publications or textbooks for things I did not say or noted as an authority for elements beyond the focus of the study. Manuscript reviewers point out many such errors in the papers submitted to *JCA*, and I often make similar observations when reviewing for other journals. Opinions or speculations in refereed articles are often cited as facts, while data-based statements are improperly called "arguments." The ineluctable, yet unfortunate, conclusion is that many publications noted as authoritative in journal articles and books were not necessarily read by the people making the citation.

Many are the routes to academic fame. Since *JCA* readers wish to influence public policy or business practices as well as fellow scholars, one cannot deny the potential impact of other publication formats, such as essays, commentary and editorials written in newspapers, business magazines or academic journals.

After my unsuccessful application for a senior position at another school, I asked a member of the search committee why I did not make the cut for an interview. She told me that some were bothered by the subject matter of my research and writing, asserting that a person who was critical of business practices should not hold a leadership position in a business degree program. Even though the accrediting group for business education says the schools should teach ethics to their students, this school did not want to hire faculty whose academic career involved the discussion of improper business practices. More importantly, her colleagues were seeking someone with "visibility," and most others on the committee had a problem that I had published so many essays. Even though these were the only publications by *any* applicant that had been read by *all* members of the search committee, they incongruously did not think such writing would contribute to name recognition of a faculty member.

The late Kim Rotzoll once explained to me that "Essay writers put themselves on a limb. They are, after all, expressing thoughtful opinions, often in short supply among many [academic writers]." While I have acquired a degree of fame—or maybe I should say "infamy"—from my commentary essays in business magazines and academic journals, they often are described as "provocative," and many apparently view this as a negative label for a scholar. It is an unfortunate statement on modern education that being provocative is now seen as something a faculty member should avoid. Instead of pushing new ideas or perspectives, we are encouraged to provide the intellectual equivalent of a day at the beach for our colleagues or students.

Of course, good research is also provocative, or so we would hope, especially studies on the consumers' interests that appear in *JCA*. So it is with my own research. In the preface to *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing*, I cited the routine-closing lines of comedian Mort Sahl when I wrote, "If there are any readers that I haven't insulted, I apologize." I was told that some friends read that and said to each other, "Give him time."

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